

# P.F.S. POST

## PHILADELPHIA FRABJOUS

*Waxing Hot, a poetics dialogue: Steve Halle (Palatine, Illinois, USA) & Adam Fieled (Philly, USA)*

### Editor:

- Adam Fieled

SH: Useful concepts. I want to respond on Keats' Negative Capability, which I think

Artist Posts  
introduced several useful concepts into modern poetics, and also served as a  
birthplace for the non-lyric/non-Romantic (I guess what you'd call "post-avant")  
lineage alive in contemporary poetics. First, I view Keats as the odd Romantic, along  
with Shelley. Whereas Shelley validated the entry of politics into poetry, Keats  
rebelled against the first wave of Romantics by heightening the power of the  
imagination and downplaying Wordsworth's "egotistical sublime."

The imaginative poetry Keats penned allowed for oddly juxtaposed words; in his  
*Odes, Nightingale & Grecian Urn*, for example; in order to create a reflection of his  
state of mind. Even though these two poems work in a highly stylized and rhetorical  
way, they reflect on Keats' consciousness— the power of imagination and the  
untranslatable power of the mind to hold disparate concepts without struggle. The  
idea of negative capability is also (ironically) an example of negative capability  
because neither Keats, nor anyone since, has presented, as far as I know, a good  
reason why some people embrace mystery and some people need closure.

- Adam Fieled (Henniker, New Hampshire): from Beams:....
- More from No Tell Motel
- from No Tell Motel
- from Borrowed House
- Tammy Armstrong (Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canad...)
- From X-Peri
- More from Equations (Thesis: Julie Hayes)
- More from The Argotist Online (poetry archive)
- From The Argotist Online
- From Eyewear

### Contributors

- Adam Fieled

"Indeterminacy" in poetry, it seems to me, is another big point of contention among experimentalists today, and I would assert that Keats' negative capability is the concept which paved the way for indeterminate poetics. I believe a relationship exists between the misinterpretation of "first thought, best thought" and the misuse of negative capability. People like to assume that Ginsberg, Kerouac and the Beats meant "first word, best word" or "first draft, best draft" and use their teachings, which are highly formulated methods for improvisational poetry, to justify writing whatever comes to mind. As we see with Bukowski, a poet who edited little (if at all), this work sometimes succeeds, often falls flat. The same is true for indeterminate poets whose work lacks closure. I think some poets misuse negative capability or "rejection of closure" as a means to avoid striving or thinking about

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their work. Poets who misuse negative capability think they can avoid essence, 2009 April 2009 May 2009 December 2009 substance and arrival, but I think this is a big mistake because it fools poets into July 2016 November 2016 January 2017 thinking they don't need intention or investigation and can operate solely on February 2017 June 2017 April 2020 May intuition. 2020 July 2020 September 2020 October 2020 February 2021 March 2021 June 2021 July 2021 December 2022 June 2023

Keats is also perhaps the first poet to address the idea that language is August 2023 September 2023 October 2023 unsatisfactory for expressing ideas completely (though Shelley suggested this too). As November 2023 December 2023 January skilled as any poet may be as word-smith, the poem will still be lacking to the thing-May 2024 June 2024 July 2024 September in-itself: be it the real triggering element of the poem or some abstract or intense December 2024 January 2025 February thought or sensation the poet tries to grasp. Through negative capability and his 2025 March 2025 April 2025 May 2025 June understanding of the powers of and limitations of art, Keats may have been the 2025 July 2025 earliest antecedent to the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets of this century. Language poets, of course, understood the fallibility of linguistic expression, so they began to work with language the way a painter might work with paints, allowing for pure linguistic abstraction and/or frustration, depending on whose side you're on. Critics sometimes call Keats a "mood" poet, meaning that every single word did not have to make total logical sense in the poem. Instead, Keats' linguistic consistency depended upon creating the desired mood, a different way of hitting "the just note": *le mot juste*.

Previous to Lang-po, I look at Keats as having laid the groundwork for the High Modernists, especially Wallace Stevens, who tried and perhaps failed as much as Keats did to create "poetry of imagination" or "supreme fiction." Like Keats, Stevens valued the imagination of the maker over the rational mind, even though I feel that Stevens, again like Keats, often wrote rational and calculated poems. Keats' influence and the influence of negative capability cannot be overstated in an existence wherein making rational sense of everyday life, let alone the "big questions," is nearly impossible.

AF: I take most of your points. The one problem I have with the schema that would put Keats behind Language Poetry and post-avant is that one could make a valid argument that Keats, bent as he was on Romantic (maybe post-Romantic) ideas of personal feeling and personal expression, pursued aims antithetical to these movements. It helps to remember that Keats mentioned negative capability in a letter, and he was referring to Shakespeare and Shakespeare's dramatic technique, rather than his own poetry, which is rooted very much in Romantic explorations of self and self-hood (whether this is done obliquely, as in *Grecian Urn*, or directly, as in *Nightingale* and his great sonnets.) In theory, Negative Capability (and its implicit ancillary devices, non-linearity, allusiveness, abstruse tangent writing, deferral of personal expression, etc.) fits in snugly to the post-modern ethos that dictates what many of us do. But negative capability doesn't factor as much into Keats' own poetry as most people tend to assume. Even when he steps beyond the personal, it is often to challenge a historical figure—*Hyperion* is a direct response to Milton—or to tell a

richly detailed but essentially linear story, as in *Isabella* and *The Eve of St. Agnes*. So, I like the connection of Keats to Stevens and post-avant, and I'm willing to give it some cred, but for me, Lord Byron takes the "proto-post-modern" cake. Remember that extreme self-obsession (like extreme impersonality, or anything extreme, in fact) is also a common post-modern trope—think of the self-mythologizing of Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, Tracy Emin, Robert Mapplethorpe, not to mention poets like Bukowski and Ginsberg, and before them Williams and Pound. Byron's complete and often facetious self-absorption (pushed knowingly to the point of self-parody) paved the way for the "art of celebrity culture" or "art-in-kitsch" which dictates so much of what we've seen in the past fifty years (in the multi-media continuum of the aesthetic.)

SH: About the Net: the pros of the Internet poetry boom far outweigh the cons, i.m.h.o. It suits modern (United States) societal impulses to be able to get what you want, when you want it. In your case and mine, we publish virtually what we want, when we want to. In that sense, it's gratifying. We don't have to sift through mountainous submissions piles. As far as publishing our own work, 'zines and blogs can offer instant gratification to us like no print outlet can.

The "con" of instant gratification would seem to be instant disposability. A plethora of information means we face a choosier readership. When you purchase a print journal or collection, the tendency is to read it: it was a "monied" choice. As for my blog, people have to want to read what's there. If they aren't interested, they're a mouse click away from something different. You and I have both discussed new poetry and the prospect of the old theme of immortality through verse. I think it's pointless to think about, because we can easily lose focus on what's important: the real work we do. The value of the lifestyle we lead (internet or not) is in doing the work, the process. I think your outlook on this might differ from mine, but I respect even the untrained poet because, essentially, he/she is getting the same benefits from doing the work as I am, regardless of poetic knowledge, lineage, theory or literary history. That's not to say I find untrained poets' work interesting. More than likely, the opposite is true, but I think I can quickly discern whether or not anyone will challenge my intellect, which is a big draw for me.

In addition to the instant gratification/instant disposability dichotomy the Internet establishes, the possibility of e-books excites me. I like materials and mobility. The combination of those two things is exciting. For the poems I write now, especially "investigative" poems, I like to have synthetic linguistic fragments or ideas handy. The Internet, and its ever-growing portability, enhances these desires for me. It's the old "writely" advice I've heard from a number of sources: always have a book, a pen and paper on hand. With notebook computers and wi-fi technology, I can have all three in one. And given the trend of technology to shrink, portability will only

increase. William Allegrezza's *moria* e-books are quite exciting because I can access them from virtually anywhere. The authors he publishes sacrifice money for hit counts. I think I'm resigned to the idea I'll never get rich off the po-biz game, so I'd rather publish an e-book that gets 3000 hits a month than make \$3000 from a print book no one reads. The attention span and eye-training it takes to read an e-book will develop, as well.

The fact of the matter is, the Internet is the hub of the counterculture. This is where you **MUST** be if you write differently, think differently or live differently; our circle of avant-minded poets populates the Internet. The only way around its importance is with "eminence," which few younger poets can claim. The Internet is the only way around the taste-making large-scale corporations like Borders and Barnes and Noble. They don't carry much counterculture material *per se*; they're looking for commodities.

AF: All good points and taken. One thing I would add about the Net is its international aspect. How else could we be in daily contact with poets in Mexico, Canada, England and Australia? This, I think, is the key to the success of *Jacket* and *Otoliths*. All artists have a need for commonality, to be part of a community larger than the small milieus that they generally, inevitably inhabit. *Jacket* has been instrumental in turning post-avant from a plethora of small, insular groups into a unified, international whole. This also applies to *Otoliths*. Between them, we have two publications that everyone, or almost everyone, in the post-avant community reads. The consolidation/unification of post-avant is almost entirely due to the influence of the Net. Centrist poetry can lay claim to no such unity. Do English, Australian, and Canadian Centrist poets read American Centrist journals, and vice versa? I would wager that they don't. *Ploughshares* in London? What I think post-avant really needs (and *Otoliths* is part of the way there) is a print equivalent of *Jacket*. If we could get in print what's already in motion on the Web, we'd really be poised for world domination.

SH: Where does post-avant poetry need to go and why does it need to go there?

This is a difficult question. I'm going to approach it from two angles, and then go on my own tangent. First, Ray Bianchi has said in conversation that post-avant poetry (I think he called it "experimental") needs an audience aside from poets. He compared post-avant poetics to contemporary visual art and avant-garde jazz, both of which he feels have an audience, albeit small ones, outside of the artists themselves. Regarding avant-garde jazz or improvised music or whatever they're calling it right now, I agree with Ray. Many of the local improvised music concert series in Chicago draw good-sized crowds. Sure, many of the non-musicians who go to these shows are artists, and experimental artists, in other fields, but it is an audience separate from

the makers themselves; this is of utmost importance. People often compare modern poetics to a self-perpetuating system or “closed circle.” Post-avant seems to be an elaborately staged version of that. Even though mainstream poetry is not commercially hot, I believe occasional readers of poetry tend to buy what Barnes & Noble carries on its brick and mortar store shelves. It’s a scary thought if you’re an experimental or “post-avant” writer. B&N tends to carry only the APR/Poetry crowd and their predecessors.

Additionally, there’s a big current push to encourage poets to make “more accessible poems.” You and I have talked about creating a middle path between extremely experimental and Centrist work, but I’m not sure we’ve settled on an answer. Poetry, in its loftiest manifestations, must work to move human linguistic and artistic expression forward. Partisans seems almost to suggest reversion to more basic creations, to expand the public’s interest in verse culture. I think it’s a dangerous idea. We first must answer this question: what do we (as poets) and everyone else (potential readers) want from poetry? I myself want poetry to live up to other art forms. What I mean is, poetry seems to be years behind other art modes (visual art, avant jazz specifically), with notable forward-thinking exceptions like Gertrude Stein and her aesthetic progeny. “New Thing” jazz started happening in the mid 1960s; Abstract Expressionism in art in the 1950s. What is the poetic equivalent of these, and when did it come into fashion? Assuming Language poetry could start that answer off.

Post-avant poetry, also, might be the answer to that question in a general way (or at least some of its subsections.) I don’t feel that post-avant needs to reach toward the mainstream. Eventually the mainstream and post-avant or experimental poetics will merge— that seems to be the trend. When will this happen? Not for a while. I’ve generally heard it said that any move to anthologize poets is way behind the current trends in poetics, sometimes 50 years behind. Pierre Joris’ and Jerome Rothenberg’s *Poems for the Millennium* is perhaps the closest thing to an “anthology of the now” we have in poetry, and I don’t think it’s up-to-the-minute. Anthologies bring experimental verse to the classroom and seal its canonization. That’s the path to mainstream readership and exposure to non-poet readers. Perhaps moves toward online anthologizing and the instantaneous possibility of the Internet will help post-avant poetry.

Speculation aside, I don’t know if I’m as distressed about post-avant’s lack of non-poet readership. I see a great amount of high-quality work emerging from the post-avant community, especially through editing *Seven Corners*. I like the directions post-avant is headed in: investigative poetics, destabilization of the egotistical sublime, improvisational poetics, contingent poetics, synthetic language, multilingual poetry, expanded translation, re-co-opting language through political-

poetic experimentation, etc.—important and interesting stuff, for my money. I'm sure you notice the same thing in *P.F.S. Post*— the poets are there, the work is good, what else can we ask for? The commitment should always be to doing the work, the "real work" as Gary Snyder would say. If the work is good, the readership will follow. For me, being a poet, post-avant or otherwise, is about the process of it all, the practice, the involvement with the art and the critical discussion that it creates.

AF: I think "process orientation" is indeed important, much more than the petty rat-race that poets (myself included) often get sucked into. My own particular preference would be towards a new kind of formalism. When you say formalism, people think you mean rhyming poems, odes and Shakespearean sonnets. I don't mean that at all. For me, formalism means, quite simply, the willingness and devoted impetus to create new forms, whether they involve conventional melopoeia or not. For me, Picasso was the ultimate formalist, though he's been tagged "Cubist" and lots of other things. Formalism ties in to seriality, working in series; you create a new form, then bend it and twist it every which way; exploring, seeing what works, milking it. Picasso spent decades proceeding in this fashion; as did Matisse, Monet, Braque, lots of the best visual artists. I suppose you could call Robert Creeley a serial poet—he came up with a signature style, and then most of his poems became (for the most part) variations on a theme. O'Hara's *Lunch Poems* are another good example of serial poetry composition. Yet, no one talks about Creeley or O'Hara as formalists, because, again, formalism is associated with archaisms, tepid retreads of old forms. New forms means a new language, however (as you said) oddly juxtaposed.

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**kari edwards (San Francisco, Ca, USA): "City of Dogs"**

#### CITY OF DOGS

Often secret lover's  
walled limits  
places the mouth  
or wound  
at the water's edge

narrowed led  
somewhere  
with nothing to give  
nothing to learn

just abundance  
reminders of opulence  
and degradation

dog territory  
with too much  
repetition of another  
other  
almost same  
teetering edge

enough for half an arm  
and distorted legs  
crawling begging  
faded half-tones  
muted indigos  
deaf crimsons  
cracked and moldy ochre  
reflected decay  
in a dialogue of warmth

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